

The Saudi gambit: Choices in the Middle East

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Whatever the motives behind it, the land-for-peace initiative floated by Saudi Arabia strikes a note of reason in the ever-escalating violence of the Middle East. Since September 2000 over 1,074 Palestinians and 375 Jews have been killed in rounds of provocation and counterprovocation. Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah proposes that if Israel agrees to allow a viable homeland for Palestinians based on, but not strictly dictated by, Israel's pre-1967 borders, Israel will gain something it has desired since 1948—normalized relations with the Arab world.

The various parties' response to the plan will reveal whether they are truly interested in reaching a bargained settlement or whether they prefer a predictable war to an inconvenient peace.

Arab states have never been ardent supporters of the Palestinian cause. In recent years their rulers have pointed to Israeli oppression and Palestinian suffering to divert attention from their own political and economic failings. The political advantages of keeping the conflict simmering may outweigh the benefits of a peace agreement. If so, then we will see the idea of peace and normalization—including the building of Israeli embassies in Damascus and Riyadh, as well as economic exchange between Israel and those countries—fade into a vague promise.

If members of the Arab League are serious about the Saudi initiative, they will declare the end of support for the terrorist activities of groups like Islamic Jihad and Hamas, which function largely outside the authority of Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. It would be cynical indeed to promise Israel normal relations in exchange for a viable Palestinian state while aiding the very groups that are pledged to destroy Israel.

As for Israel, the question is whether it will yield its ambition for a "greater Israel" that includes Gaza and the West Bank. If expansion is the final goal of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the constituency he represents—an Israel that stretches

uninterrupted from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean—then no peace plan is likely to be found acceptable. But if Sharon is truly interested in security for Israel, a security that does not presuppose Israel's expansion into Palestinian territory, then he will take the Saudi proposal seriously.

The Bush administration, for its part, must be willing to put pressure on Israel—which is always a risk in domestic politics. Colin Powell's demand that Israel withdraw from Palestinian-controlled territory it had invaded, and the U.S.'s sponsorship of the United Nations resolution that affirms "a vision of a region where two states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders," suggest that the U.S. may be prepared to exercise more aggressive leadership. Such action will not be convenient. But it is the only way to move beyond the predictable.